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**Genocidal Killings and Collective Denial:
an Exploratory Essay.**

by

Kurt Jonassohn

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**Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montréal, Québec
Canada H3G 1M8**

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Concordia University

And there's always something suspect
about an intellectual on the winning side.
Václav Havel. *Disturbing the Peace*.
New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p.167.

INTRODUCTION

In my collaborative work with Frank Chalk it was he who introduced the term "collective denial" to deal with the strange phenomenon by which certain important events are never mentioned in polite conversation or in history books. By the adjective "collective" we mean to focus attention on an attribute of a society or culture. In actual fact, individual denial and collective denial are but the two extremes of a continuum. In the present paper attention will be focused on an aspect of society rather than on the actions and attitudes of individual actors.

Initially, our interest in collective denial was aroused by the revisionist literature that denied the historicity of the genocide of the Armenians by Ottoman Turkey and of the Jews and Gypsies by Nazi Germany. We soon realized that such problems of denial have much wider ramifications that are worth exploring.

Since all cultures and societies have denied some aspects of reality that

did not fit in with their pre-conceived notions and values, some interesting questions arise, such as: why and under what circumstances such collectivities engage in denials, and whether such denials have a bearing on subsequent events.

Collective denial may be intentional or unintentional. In the latter case it is the purest expression of a culture. In a homogeneous culture there is unspoken agreement on a range of attitudes and values that define the shape of the world as well as what is included in its purview. Therefore, certain topics simply lie outside its view of the world. When collective denial is intentional, the opposite situation obtains. In order to be intentional, there must be strong enough central control on communication to prevent the expression of undesired attitudes and values that are within the domain of the dominant culture. When such control is strong enough to prevent undesired communication, the temptation to launch desired communications becomes very strong. This is what outside observers usually refer to as disinformation. When intentional collective denial lacks credibility it is often reinforced by relevant disinformation. That situation creates enormous difficulties for the observer interested in assigning credibility among several contradictory versions of information. The amount of effort that has to be invested in resolving these difficulties is a good measure of the success of intentional denial and disinformation.

SOME ILLUSTRATIONS.

Without trying to be exhaustive, it is possible to point to several areas where collective denial seems to occur routinely.

In each society we find cultural prescriptions and conceptions that are generally upheld as principles and generally ignored in actual practice.

Thus, cannibalism is the subject of a very wide-spread taboo that is almost everywhere strongly supported while its occurrence is denied with great vehemence. However, there is considerable evidence that it is not exactly a rare event. But that evidence is very thinly scattered and ignored in most history books. Similar observations apply to certain sexual matters and dietary habits.

In the political arena we are perhaps most familiar with the discrepancy between professed norms and their distance from reality. Contemporary increases in cynicism about politics makes this an area where collective denials are most easily demonstrated. Thus, many countries would vehemently deny that their political institutions are designed to encourage and protect the amassing of great individual fortunes, although outside observers find it easy enough to demonstrate that this is exactly what they are doing.

Similar observations apply in the religious sphere. All religions place great emphasis on a series of strictures on individual as well as collective behaviors. While these are routinely affirmed on ritual occasions, the violation of these strictures is rarely reported. When such reporting is unavoidable the facts are either denied, or played down, or side-tracked by semantic obfuscation. Thus, the commandment 'thou shalt not kill', which is common to all Western religions, is routinely violated with impunity when committed under such semantic labels as 'accidents' or 'war casualties'. In such cases it is usually not the facts that are denied, but their relevance to the commandment not to kill.

A good example of semantic obfuscation is the use of the term "famine". Its widely understood implication is that starvation has occurred as the

result of natural disasters, like plagues of locusts or absence of rain resulting in crop failure. This generally accepted meaning of the term is so embedded in our culture that the idea of a man-made famine lacks credibility when first encountered. The facts of the matter are that famines have been, and still are, widely used as methods in the conduct of human conflicts. They are a weapon that does not require highly developed technology or elaborate bureaucracy, that costs very little, and that can be used by both sides to a conflict. Contemporary perpetrators find it useful to use the term famine because it gives them access to humanitarian aid that would not be available to support the aims of their conflict.

Collective denial may take place in two radically different ways. The Soviet Union up to 1956 simply denied the facts of the famine, the gulag, and the terror. Since then, increasing amounts of information are becoming available that confirm the reports that initially were brought out by refugees. Modern Turkey follows the very opposite tactic. While it does not deny that a large number of Armenians perished during World War I, it insists that these casualties were the result of war-time conditions and did not exceed the casualties suffered by the rest of the population.

In pre-modern times, collective denial was often the result of the hierarchical structure of society and the values attached to such strata. It was usually only the upper strata that mattered, and nothing that happened to the lower strata seemed to be worth reporting. Similarly, in cases of conflict, war, and persecution, it was only the victory that mattered. Bloodshed and suffering were the taken-for-granted fate of the losers and not worth reporting. These omissions we might consider as unintentional denials.

In modern times, large areas of the world have experienced an increasing awareness of the humanity of all social strata as well as a development of codes of human rights applicable to victors and losers alike. Therefore, when events that violate such norms are not reported we can usually talk of intentional denial.

Above it was suggested that individual and collective denials may be the extremes on a continuum. It may equally be the case that acknowledgement of the facts and their denial are also extremes on a continuum. In addition, one may ask: who is the collectivity in collective denial? That awkward question leads to the realization that there may be a different continuum of acknowledgement-denial for perpetrators, for victims, and for bystanders. Clearly, there is a lot of room for further exploration of these question. Here, there is time only to consider the role of the perpetrators.

The most dramatic collective denials seem to occur in the sphere of ideologies. When an ideology is adopted in a country, its image of that country often tends to find general acceptance and support. The fact that this image bears little or no resemblance to reality does not seem to detract from its acceptability. A few illustrations from familiar ideologies may be in order.

- Young Turk ideas of the homogeneous Turkic state are based on definitions of an ancient Turkic culture, a physical type, and an ethnic homogeneity that find very few parallels in the real world of the Turkish state. But such discrepancies are actively denied, much less reported.

- Soviet Russia is based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology that includes a model of a class-less society that has never existed and that is not being realized in the USSR. Again, while the principle is routinely reaffirmed, its violation in practice is not to be reported. (At least that was the state of

affairs until the arrival of glasnost.)

- Nazi racial theory defined an Aryan racial type that few Germans and even fewer of their leaders were able to meet -- a state of affairs that many Germans might have observed, but that was not to be discussed.

- The US constitution describes a society that is characterized by justice and freedom and that every American seems to support -- an ideal which is quite removed from everyday reality.

CONSEQUENCES

The discussion of the consequences that may result from collective denial has to be considered separately for those consequences that are internal to the culture or society and for those that are external to it.

External consequences: Other cultures may perceive the discrepancy between the denial and the empirical facts and may consider that culture as hypocritical. In international relations such denials may lead to misunderstandings and conflict because the two parties may be negotiating from different bases and assumptions. It may also lead to divergent value judgements. In international organizations it may cause frictions that can escalate to produce quite serious results.

Internal consequences: Inside the relevant culture or society denials may have no immediate consequences if information is tightly controlled; if not, they may lead to internal opposition in political matters and to a general lack of confidence in the public authorities. They may also lead to erroneous definitions of reality with positive or negative results, depending on the particular aspect that is being denied.

THE DENIAL OF GENOCIDE

Until roughly the beginning of the 20. century genocide was not something to be denied. It was reported either in a matter-of-fact manner by the perpetrator, or it was even bragged about as the victorious outcome of a successful campaign.

In the 20. century we have become more oriented to human rights and freedoms, and we have redefined the mass killing of non-combatants as a violation of these rights. The result is that perpetrators either deny their actions or confess to them in an admission of "guilt".

A TELLING COMPARISON

The genocides committed by Ottoman Turkey and by Nazi Germany are in many ways quite different. One of the ways in which they differ is that Turkey has never acknowledged that it committed a genocide while Western Germany has done so.

(Footnote: One of the aspects that complicates this comparison is that in the case of Nazi Germany we are dealing with three successor states: Austria which somehow managed to convince most of the world that it was Hitler's first victim; West Germany which acknowledged its guilt; and East Germany which took the position that West Germany was guilty because all the Nazis were gathered there while it was the blameless home of the communists who had fought the Nazis. Now that West and East Germany have been reunited the past will have to be re-interpreted again.)

While complicated social processes can never be explained in terms of a single variable, it is instructive to look comparatively at the post-genocide histories of Turkey and Germany. Turkey performed its genocide during

World War I, which it lost while Germany performed its genocide during World War II which it also lost. In both countries genocides were performed in the name of a new ideology that held out the promise of a perfected future if only they could eliminate those groups that prevented this goal from being achieved. The Turkish successors to the Ottoman government tried and sentenced the main perpetrators in absentia, but had no opportunity to carry out the sentences. They later reinstated some of the perpetrators as national heroes; several of them were actually killed by members of the victim group while others died in foreign campaigns. None of them seem to have died of old age. Many of the main perpetrators of the Nazi genocide were tried in various war crimes trials and many of their sentences were actually carried out.

Turkey has remained a poor, underdeveloped country. To this day it has great difficulty in providing a reasonable standard of living for its people. Some of its labour force is exported to more developed countries and their remittances represent a significant part of its hard currency inflow. West Germany, on the other hand, has rebuilt its industrial base so successfully that it is now considered one of the world's industrial powers and one of its richest countries. In order to do this it had to import foreign labour, a significant part of which came from Turkey. Its enormous wealth has also made it possible for West Germany to spend several billion Marks on reparations to some of the victims of the genocide.

Turkey has devoted considerable resources to spreading its version of events and to counteracting the version spread by the victims and by most of the scholarly community concerned with genocide studies. This position and these activities have created for it many difficulties in international

relations, both the bilateral ones with other countries and those with international organizations. It was accepted as a member of NATO mainly because of its crucial geopolitical location vis-a-vis the USSR during the cold war; but it has so far failed to be accepted into the European Community -- membership in which it has coveted for several years. It also continues to have difficulties in the Commission on Human Rights of the UN Economic and Social Council. West Germany has had the very opposite experience. It is an important member of NATO and of the European Community. It has good economic and diplomatic relations with most countries in the world. It has bought itself increasing respect by its hospitality towards refugees and asylum seekers and, since the end of the cold war, its largesse toward East Germany as well as other East bloc countries.

As mentioned above, it would be ridiculous to claim that all of these differences could be explained by the two countries' differences with regard to the acknowledgement-denial dimension. But one can't help wondering what position Turkey would have found itself in if it had acknowledged the guilt of its predecessor government. The more nuanced question to be taken seriously by concerned scholars is: what contribution did their position on the acknowledgement-denial dimension make to these countries' post-war recuperation and subsequent development?

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